

Community Case Study Victoria, B.C.

1. Introduction

This case study of Victoria, B.C. is one of a series of case studies of communities participating in the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first outlines community action related to homelessness prior to the federal government initiative. It then describes the planning and implementation structure the community put in place to respond to the NHI and lists projects undertaken to date. Finally, it notes some of the unique issues related to homelessness observed in the community and some of the lessons the community learned that could be useful to other communities responding to NHI or a similar federal initiative.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing the case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working at the community level and the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative. Communities will thus have an overview of what is being done in their own community, and of what can be learned from the experiences in individual communities that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of Victoria's homelessness plan and other documents and reports relating to homelessness and a series of interviews with people representing the following groups (a complete list of the groups is attached to this report):

- local HRDC homelessness managers and staff
- provincial and municipal government officials in related program areas
- community planning steering committee and sub-committees
- community organizations active in service delivery for homeless persons and people at risk

Information from the community case studies done across Canada will be compiled with data on projects being funded and other information to give HRDC a national perspective on how the Initiative is working to date.

2. Homelessness Activities Prior to the Federal Government Initiative

Extent of overall activity, programs, facilities

As in most Canadian communities, charitable and/or non-profit organizations have been providing for the needs of the poor and the homeless in the city of Victoria and the thirteen other municipalities that make up Greater Victoria for over 100 years.

Several years before the federal homelessness initiative began in January, 2000 a number of local community groups in Victoria came together to identify strategies to cope with cuts to government social services spending. One of those coalitions was the CRUNCH committee, formed in 1997, which was made up of social service agencies, the business community and local government. Committee members met to develop strategies to deal with poverty and homelessness in the community despite the limited funding available at that time. Members also supported the creation of the Housing Affordability Partnership to focus on the need for affordable housing.

Community planning

Some groups, such as the CRUNCH committee, were meeting prior to NHI to discuss homelessness, but there was no formal regional strategy to meet and to address the issue.

Involvement by federal, provincial and municipal governments

Prior to the NHI, federal government involvement in homelessness was limited to initiatives sustained by CMHC through the RRAP program to contribute to the renovation of residential dwellings for low-income renters. After the federal decision to phase out direct involvement in the funding of affordable housing, the province continued to fund the building of low-rent housing units through its agent, B.C. Housing. Recent provincial housing policy has encouraged the funding of low-rent housing for single, hard-to-house homeless individuals or those at risk of homelessness throughout the province.

In addition, the province has funded shelter and social services through three agencies in Victoria on an on-going basis. The Ministry of Human Resources pays for sixteen hostel beds at the Salvation Army and an additional five overflow beds during the winter months under the Cold/Wet Weather Strategy. Payment is made on a per diem basis. A similar arrangement exists with Streetlinks, for 44 beds for men and 11 for women. In 2001 the Ministry found additional funds for 5 beds at the Salvation Army, but this extra funding is not part of regular program funding and may not be available again.

Victoria's Capital Health Region partnered with B.C. Housing to secure housing for homeless persons with mental health and addictions issues, and with the Ministry of Human Resources to fund and staff a satellite office in downtown Victoria to better serve the housing, social assistance and social service needs of the same population.

The municipality has participated actively in the search for community solutions for housing and homelessness and has a Community Development division and a full-time social planner. As noted, the city was a member of the CRUNCH committee, which supported the creation of a Community Outreach position to work with the homeless and those at risk of homelessness in the downtown area in partnership with the local United Way and the province. Funding for this position extends from the fall of 1999 to the fall of 2002. The city has also worked closely with local groups of homeless youth to find solutions to youth homelessness.

3. How Victoria Has Responded to the Federal Government Initiative

Initial work by HRDC

The city of Victoria was granted a portion of "20 percent funding" as a result of extensive lobbying by concerned members of the Victoria community to Minister Bradshaw during her visits to the province. In its initial consultations with provincial officials, HRDC decided to limit the spending of SCPI dollars to the city of Victoria itself, excluding the other 13 municipalities that made up Greater Victoria. The reasons for this were as follows: (a) Victoria had been previously identified as the hub of activity by the homeless population in Greater Victoria; (b) most of the homeless tended to gravitate to the city for support and assistance; (c) the amount of money allocated to the city (\$1.4 million over three years) was seen as relatively small and it was felt that a process to determine how to distribute the funding to 13 municipalities was too complex an exercise to undertake; and, (d) statistics clearly demonstrated the seriousness of homelessness and poverty in the city of Victoria.

Once federal funding was granted, HRDC staff moved quickly to help establish the Victoria Steering Committee on Homelessness as a focus for community planning. In November 2000, the committee set out to gather information, begin community consultations and increase public awareness about homelessness.

Community planning process

The consultants and the steering committee organized extensive research and consultation activities with the groups listed below, and all but a few participated. The following organizations are represented in the community planning process:

Overall Community Planning

- Downtown churches
- Victoria Housing providers
- Community Centre Network
- Community Economic Development Corporation
- Downtown service providers
- City of Victoria's Social Planning and Housing Advisory Committee
- Victoria Native Friendship Centre
- United Way of Greater Victoria
- Canadian Homebuilders Association

The consultants and the steering committee worked to involve the whole community in the planning process. For example, they consulted with community groups and held focus groups and interviews with homeless persons. Homeless persons were also consulted during the planning, but were not directly involved in the planning process itself. As in other communities, committee members struggled to find ways to involve homeless people in the process.

Aboriginal members of the Victoria community were invited to participate in the planning process and did so. The majority of Aboriginal representatives were pleased with the community plan developed by the committee and, as a result, did not see the need to repeat the exercise for their population. Instead, Aboriginal groups chose to adapt the plan to their specific needs and the members of their selection committee used it to help select proposals for funding to address Aboriginal homelessness.

Gaps and priorities

The regional homelessness plan identified the following gaps and priorities in Victoria:

1. availability of safe, affordable housing and the continuum of services – the need for "safe places" for clients to be able to turn once they leave the street life, the sex trade and/or substance abuse
2. enhancement of support services – especially for homeless persons with mental health conditions, those living with HIV/AIDS, ex-offenders and youth – including: coordination of outreach services; development of a crisis stabilization unit; provision of health care and dental services; coordination of life skills programs; provision of more preventative services;

development of a housing registry service; and supply of storage facilities; together with training and mentoring for people working with the homeless

3. coordination and communication: encourage collaborative partnerships and information sharing between agencies; coordinate the discharge process of mental health care, correctional facilities and agencies that serve the homeless; develop communication and education strategies designed to keep homeless persons informed of the services available to them in the community; create case management tools that allow the homeless to take complete advantage of the continuum of supports in the community
4. capacity: develop strategies to ascertain the number of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the community, along with their characteristics and their needs, and provide on-going support to service providers and volunteer-based agencies that serve the homeless

Implementation to date

At the time of the case study, the following projects had been approved:

Projects Approved to Date
AIDS of Vancouver Island To renovate and improve the Positive Living Centre to better serve homeless clients, especially those with disabilities
Burnside Gorge Community Association To promote a continuum-of-supports approach to reducing homelessness in the Burnside Gorge Community
City of Victoria Asset and Gap Project
Greater Victoria Drug and Rehabilitation Association To furnish a six-bed recovery home with basic furniture and supplies
M'akola B.C.H Society To provide transitional housing to homeless Aboriginals
Open Door Inner City Ministry To operate a drop-in centre that offers a variety of services to homeless persons – including meals, showers, clothing, counselling, advocacy and support
PEERS – Prostitutes, Empowerment, Education and Resource Society To work with former sex-trade workers and provide them with a stable transitional housing option
Victoria Human Exchange Society and the GAEA Recovery Home for Women To establish additional supported housing for homeless persons
YM/YWCA and the Boys and Girls Club Services

To operate a night shelter for homeless youths aged 15 to 24
Threshold Housing Society To provide life skills training to homeless youth in Victoria
Upper Room Society To purchase the necessary equipment to provide meals to the homeless and those at risk of homelessness
Victoria Cool Aid Society To provide temporary storage space to homeless persons and to identify the life skills training/learning needs of homeless persons
Victoria Native Friendship Centre To provide a drop-in program for homeless Aboriginal youth

The selection committee has completed the second round of project selection for Year 2 of SCPI funding. At the time of writing, projects were undergoing the final steps of the approval process, but 16 projects had been submitted to the federal government for approval.

Key observations

One of the hallmarks of the federal government's homelessness initiative is its flexibility to adapt to circumstances in individual communities. The community case studies highlight this aspect of the Initiative because participating communities all have unique ways of addressing homelessness according to their circumstances and preferred approaches, and all have different ways of adapting the NHI to their particular needs.

In Victoria, researchers developing the case studies reported the following key observations about the way this community is responding to the federal homelessness initiative to date:

- The guarantee of funding for homelessness was the key to attracting interested parties around a table to deal with the issue. Both Minister Bradshaw and local HRDC staff were praised by the people in the community we spoke to for the commitment and support they offered to the Victoria community. Their actions have clearly served to increase the profile of the federal government in the greater community.
- The community plan to address homelessness in Victoria is seen as an effective instrument that provided a forum for all interested parties to participate, and supported an action for input from the homeless themselves. Having the "right" people around the table (that is, individuals with an intimate understanding of the issue, a network of resources in the community and a willingness to make a long-term commitment to the process) is seen as an important element of a successful

community planning process. The spirit of cooperation was strengthened by the municipal council, which openly supported the committee's efforts.

- Community planning, and especially the “gaps and priorities exercise,” has broadened the community's awareness of homelessness, the range of issues that need to be addressed as well as the possible solutions. This has contributed to a community commitment to come to the table to solve problems rather than concentrate on funding issues.
- The Aboriginal and youth communities were both actively involved in the development of a community action plan that respects their particular needs. The executive director of the Victoria Native Friendship Centre sits on the city's steering committee and Aboriginal groups were encouraged to submit proposals for SCPI funding over and above funding that was available to them through the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) homelessness fund. One Aboriginal group secured funding for its homelessness projects through the SCPI process. Representatives from agencies focused on youth homelessness were also encouraged to submit proposals despite the availability of other youth homelessness funds, and two youth homelessness projects received SCPI funds.
- Although the decision to focus SCPI funding on the city of Victoria received much support, three interviewees representing service providers from surrounding municipalities in the region expressed disappointment with this decision. All three organizations felt that the needs of the homeless in their communities had been ignored in the process of developing the homelessness plan.
- Although many were pleased with the commitment and support they had received from the local HRDC staff, the majority expressed concern about the unwieldy bureaucracy associated with the initiative. Most felt that the paperwork was very time consuming and cumbersome. Others, with limited resources to provide services, were concerned with the amount of time they had to devote to the administration as well as the amount of resources needed to respond it.
- For the project selection process, expressions of interest were distributed among smaller teams within the selection committee. Some selection committee members would have preferred that every member study all the expressions of interest. They felt that not everyone was working with the same information. In addition, the majority felt that one day was not a long enough time to reflect on the merits of each project in addressing the identified gaps and priorities.
- The smaller Aboriginal selection process proceeded with less difficulty, yet this community was frustrated with the delays in obtaining approval and project funds.

- The communication strategy adopted by the homelessness committee was effective at maintaining the flow of information among the different partners, including HRDC. Some committee members were unsure about the effectiveness of communication beyond the committee but could not determine if members had the time or resources to communicate their deliberations to secondary sources and/or the greater community.
- Although activities to address homelessness in Victoria are still in the early stages, service providers are already taking to heart the commitment to working more closely together to deal with homelessness – an example mentioned during several interviews for this study is the partnership between the Open Door Ministry and the Upper Room Society to work under one roof to provide shelter and drop-in services for homeless men and women in the city. Service providers and community leaders have decided to actively encourage partnership ventures to address homelessness in the future.
- Some participants were candid in voicing concerns about the sustainability of their own projects given the present economic climate in British Columbia and the budgetary decisions made by the provincial government in mid-January of this year. Officials from the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services as well as the Ministry of Human Resources interviewed for this study reinforced those concerns. The consensus in Victoria is that the federal government needs to recognize the limits of the local community's ability to secure the funding needed to maintain activities specifically targeted to homeless and at-risk individuals.

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